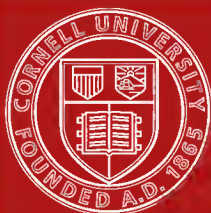


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TWO ESSAYS

ON

ROBERT BROWNING.

I.

ROBERT BROWNING AND THE POETRY OF THE FUTURE.

AN ADDRESS BEFORE THE BROWNING SOCIETY OF PHILADELPHIA.

II.

ROBERT BROWNING AND THE ARABESQUE IN ART.

A LECTURE DELIVERED TO THE SENIOR CLASS IN ARTS OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

FELIX E.^WSCHELLING, A. M.,

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

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THE following words were completed some days before the recent news of Mr. Browning's death. Of Mr. Browning, the man, it becomes us not yet to speak; the memory of him belongs to those into whose personal grief it would be only an impertinence for a stranger to inquire. Time has not yet made the author's life the inheritance of the public. Mr. Browning's life has been all that could be wished, and here is neither time nor place for an obtrusive eulogy of that life. But Robert Browning, the author, has been long the common property of us all. His works have been so long before us, and his name has been so lauded and linked with the immortals that have gone before, that death can add little to an apotheosis already so complete. To speak of him in praise or in dispraise has been long a fashion among us, and the accident of his recent demise can assuredly make no further utterance unfitting. It is yet too soon to attempt an estimate of this life of prolonged literary activity, or to seek for the explanation of a contemporary reputation almost unexampled in the annals of literature; but it can never be impertinent to add—if not to the adulation that streams from a thousand altars—at least a word to the better understanding of a figure, which, however taste may change, must always be regarded as one of the most prominent and interesting of our century. Moreover, the extraordinary prominence which Mr. Browning's followers have long claimed for him, a claim which has sought to dethrone all the poets of our tongue, save the prince of poets himself, is in itself a challenge to all men to speak; and if, as has been said, Mr. Browning has divided the critics into two hostile camps, so portentous a power may well stand for a subject of attention at any time.

I.

ROBERT BROWNING AND THE POETRY OF THE FUTURE.

THERE is, perhaps, no more perilous position into which a man may thrust himself, than to stand forth as a prophet. To acknowledge the general prevalence of astigmatism and other visual disorders, but add that they are confined to our neighbors ; to claim for ourselves not only a clearer vision as to things past and present, but to arrogate an ability to rend the shadowy veil of futurity, and foretell, to a nicety, the trend of coming events : these are the perilous assumptions of the prophet. It is not, therefore, as a prophet that I stand before you this evening ; nor have I chosen my subject to the end of a miserable quibble that the poetry of Mr. Browning is as comprehensible as the yet unwritten poetry of the future. The future is quite as impenetrable to me as to most men. I would only look outward, towards the horizon, instead of inward, at the minute and secret mechanism of the poet's brain. In short, I would seek to gaze with you for a moment—using what glasses we may—on that mighty firmament in which the creations of Robert Browning move and have their being ; now shining as some bright particular star, and again wandering in courses as erratic as those of the planets themselves. Without doubt here are many luminous points, and the deeps, be they naught or the infinite assemblage of stars too distant and too thickly clustered for average sight, are among the deeps of infinity itself.

Far be it from me to deny the imperative necessity of minute and critical reading. Above all things let us first read our authors and thus lessen that greatest of the literary evils of our age, the reading about books. And yet, perhaps, Mr. Browning has been, on the whole, far too minutely read, to the exclusion of a more general estimate based upon a broad comparison of his actual achievements with those of the masters of English poetry. Let us, therefore, for the nonce, be not over particular of quibbles, lest, in the deciphering of some curious hiero-

glyph carved on the threshold of the temple, we lose sight of the grandeur of its architectural proportions and never penetrate into the *arcana* of its true significance. Let us do even more than this, and withdraw from among the dwellings of that sculptured city, the works of Robert Browning, with its minarets, its towers, its logical bulwarks, and its fantastic *façades*; let us sit down in the calm of the evening, now that the work is done, and, tracing its outlines against the setting sun, try to get at the meaning of it all, and inquire if this city be really so built as to live forever beside the literary splendors of other days; or if it shall, at some day, become like Nineveh, a fall and a mockery of that which was, and of that which envious time has left no more.

There are great men who have succeeded by their adaptability, by their versatility in seizing on the needs and tastes of their times and in furnishing food for these needs and tastes. It is, perhaps, unnecessary to say that many a little man has made his mark and lived his brief day for the possession of this one quality. Another class, and one far different, consists of those, who by persistent effort and a commanding quality of mind, have succeeded in impressing their peculiarities upon the public, and in commanding attention, where the other class only solicited it. To the first class belong such men as Pope and Dryden, and, in our own day, Longfellow, Tennyson, and such cultivators of that tulip-garden, *vers de société*; as Austin Dobson, to mention only the chief gardener: to the second, such men as Wagner in music, Millais in art, and Hugo and Mr. Browning in poetry. These men are revolutionists, gamblers for high stakes, whose success is immortality, whose failure is oblivion. The other class may, some of them, remain content with a qualified success: with the radical it is victory or death. His victory means that he has succeeded in leading men to the conquest of new intellectual provinces; for there are conquests in art as in science, and the secrets of nature and of human life are often suddenly revealed to the poet, where the man of science has labored with pick and scalpel for ages in vain. Robert Browning belongs to the second and nobler class; it remains for us to inquire if this be a true prophet or some false demiurge thundering in the tones of the real Jove.

As may be readily surmised, the title of this paper was suggested by a phrase not long since upon our lips: the music of the future suggests the poetry of the future. Between the two men, Mr. Browning and Richard Wagner, there has always seemed to me a peculiar resemblance. Both belong to that resolute, unyielding stamp of genius that cares little for the tastes of the age in which it lives, and yet represents, to an unusual degree, the tendencies of that age. Both have

succeeded in gaining a large following, and both have required of their votaries unconditional surrender, with the result that the very vices of the art of each have been extolled into a shibboleth of artistic reform. There is even a closer resemblance; if we will but seek it, in their very methods of art. Each has proclaimed absolute freedom from former rules and conventions, and each has carried his liberty to license, while announcing this the only true and saving artistic faith. Although Mr. Browning has not said it personally as did Wagner in his own case, at least all believing Browningites must hold: There is but one Art, and Browning is its Prophet! Nay, some in their zeal go yet a step further and proclaim: Paracelsus, Silence or the Sword! Neither the music nor the poetry of the future is wanting in force, in self-confidence, or in audacity; all of which, however ludicrous in a paltry pretender, must command our respect when coming from such a man as Robert Browning, for assuredly this is of that heroic stuff of which true prophets are made.

Truly he has not the wisdom of his fathers who will venture into that maelstrom of a much-vexed question: What is poetry? And yet there are some points, commonplaces of our literary creeds though they are, the enunciation of which can alone define the position of any writer upon this ever-fertile topic.

It is not among the canons of my faith "that metrical form is the *sole* condition absolutely demanded of poetry." Vastly do I prefer Coleridge's wise dictum, so threadbare from quotation and so constantly forgotten: "Prose is the opposite, not of poetry, but of verse or metre." To me, the chapters of Job or Isaiah, though I know them only in their English dress, contain the essence of real poetry. To use the words of Mr. Frederic Harrison, "We have the conception, the melody, the winged words, and inimitable turns of phrase, which constitute the highest poetry." The same is true of much of the impassioned and inspired work of Thomas Carlyle, whom at least one eminent critic has called "perhaps our greatest poet." The same cannot be said of the following:

"Leave uneffaced the crazy labyrinth
Of alteration and amendment, lines
Which every dabster felt in duty bound
To signalize his power of pen and ink
By adding to the plan once plain enough?
Why keep each fool's bequeathment, scratch and blur
Which overscrawls and underscores the piece;
Nay, strengthen them by touches of your own?
Well that's my mission, so I serve the world,

Figure as man o' the moment,—in default
Of somebody inspired to strike such change
Into society."

It is greatly to be feared that no toy-bladders of verse can suffice to raise the bodily dimensions of *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* one inch above the earth, and that his highness and his compatriots *Mr. Sludge* and *Bishop Blougram*, must forever stalk irremediably along the level stretches of prose.

Again, while there can be no question about Victor Hugo's regal proclamation of the absolute freedom of art, there is, most unfortunately, such a thing as a bad picture or a bad poem; and that not because either transcends the limits of art, but because each fails to recognize those principles by which art is art, and not something else. It is not enough to demand of a poet that he be capable of a good work; we have a right to ask that he exercise his taste—if he have any—on the inferior products of his mind, and that he have the ability to reject. It is not enough to have written *Lucy*; to have rejected and expunged from his works *Peter Bell* and *The Idiot Boy* would have torn a sere and yellow leaf from the wreath of immortal bays that crowns the brow of Wordsworth. Far from wondering, with Charles Dickens, that the poet Gray should "come walking down to posterity with so small a volume under his arm," I honor this great poet for the possession of that admirable trait, so rare among men of letters and so invaluable, the power of self-criticism and selection. Gray has his reward, for he lives to-day and will always live; whilst many a poet, showing equal powers at times, and in verse making up quite the bulk of Gray, wears—as Mr. Gosse has irreverently said of poor Southey—"the dryest laurels that ever flourished on the steeps of Parnassus."

Probably no one will gainsay the statement, that there are few poets—even the greatest—who have not written unpoetical lines. Wordsworth has written a sufficient quantity of bad verses to furnish out the travelling apparel of at least three third-rate bards; the ambrosial locks of Homer nod sometimes; and there are execrable lines in Shakespeare himself—though the Shakespearians get out of that difficulty by denying him their authorship. Perhaps no one will claim the lines from *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, quoted above, as poetry; and yet they were taken at random from one of a class of Mr. Browning's productions which exhibit many of his distinctive traits, perhaps at their best. Let us try once more:

"Here is a thing that happened. Like wild beasts whelped, for den,
In a wild part of North England, there lived once two wild men
Inhabiting one homestead, neither a hovel nor hut,
Time out of mind their birthright: father and son, these—but—
Such a son, such a father! Most wildness by degrees
Softens away: yet, last of their line, the wildest and worst were these.

"Criminals, then? Why, no: they did not murder and rob;
But, give them a word, they returned a blow—old Halbert as young Hob:
Harsh and fierce of word, rough and savage of deed,
Hated or feared the more—who knows?—the genuine wild-beast breed."

Verily this is a full realization of Wordsworth's doctrine, that the language of verse and prose is identical; and yet, even Wordsworth never went to this length, for he required that the prose be good, and this is very bad prose and much worse poetry. The shade of Lindley Murray could scarcely parse the first stanza. But bear with one more quotation; this time from that facetiously entitled production, *Red Cotton Night Cap Country*.

"Night-caps, night comfort of the human race:
Their usage may be growing obsolete,
Still, in the main, the institution stays.
And though yourself may possibly have lived,
And probably will die, undignified—
The Never-night-capped—more experienced folk
Laugh you back answer—What should Night-cap be
Save Night-cap pure and simple? Sorts of such?
Take cotton for the medium, cast an eye
This side to comfort, lambswool, or the like,
That side to frilly cambric costliness,
And all between proves Night-cap.' Add
'Fiddle!' and I confess the argument."

This is but a scrap from a capacious garment of the same absurd cut and pattern. The word "fiddle" comes like an inspiration, and affords an excuse for a rambling jaunt into the realm of Fiddledom, in which much quaint and useless knowledge of Guarnerius, Straduaris, Corelli, is aired, with the fiddle show at South Kensington. There often come moments to me after the reading of some such stuff as this, from the hand of such a man, in which I pause and wonder if after all this be not some huge Gargantuan life-joke which Mr. Browning has been playing on us all, to test the limit of human capability. How will the twentieth century man laugh—if contemplation of the protoplasm and social statics has not taken all the laugh out of him—how will he fill his capacious chest and laugh at the puerility of his forefathers, when he learns that such stuff was once sagely considered in learned bodies in many

parts of the world, and as sagely compared with the inimitable genuine nonsense of Shakespeare? Seriously, such stuff would not be tolerated a moment in prose, or from any other hand. Verses like those quoted (although the second extract is assuredly not wit) may be life, truth, logic, metaphysics—anything you like, but poetry they are *not*; and that verse should be their medium is the merest accident, and one that must impair their value as life, truth, metaphysics, or what not. Let me not be misunderstood. From those that love their Browning, I would seek to take no jot or tittle of that love. All honor is due Robert Browning for his truth, for his high ethics, and for his poetry, when he has vouchsafed to write poetry. It would be absurd to impeach the genius of such a man, or to express a doubt of his genuine poetic powers. Of both there is sufficient evidence; but this evidence is not to be found in the bulk of his writings, and the bulk of Mr. Browning's writing is not poetry.

Mr. Browning has been called the poet of psychology; a combination of terms which, it is greatly to be feared, is likely to prove comparable to the old story of Pegasus yoked to a plow with some terrestrial hack for a yoke-fellow. Mr. Lowell has given us in four words the result of Pope's similar attempt to drive his pseudo-Pegasus in harness with the eighteenth-century philosophy of Bolingbroke: "careless thinking carefully versified" is all that is left of it. It is at least questionable if the new yoke-fellows, poetry and psychology, are likely to prove much happier. Leaving for the moment Mr. Browning's impracticable and undramatic dramas, and his lyrics for the minority of which his name is bound to remain among the chosen denizens of his country's Parnassus, I wish to call your attention to a class of his productions, so original in their nature, and so hybrid in their constitution, that the language in its poverty has been compelled to coin a new word, "Browningesque," that the thing might not remain nameless. All of these productions are founded on the casuistical defense or attack of some psychological question, by preference as ugly and forbidding as possible. All proceed by the most probing method of analysis, under guise of interminable dialogue and monologue; all contain little or no action, no more characterization than "you may take upon a knife's point to choke a daw withal;" but casuistry enough to furnish out a college of Jesuit priests. Moreover, they are always in verse, and expressed with that eccentricity and grotesqueness of style that has given rise to the term above mentioned, "Browningesque."

Here are some of the subjects of these "poems:" *Fifine*, "a defense of inconstancy or the right of experiment in love;" *Prince Hohenstiel-*

Schwangau, "a defense of the doctrine of expediency;" *Bishop Blougram's Apology*, "a defense of religious conformity, in those cases in which the doctrines to which we conform exceed our powers of belief;" *Sludge the Medium*, a defense of charlatanism in America, with anachronisms enough to make the sea coast of Bohemia a trifling offense. To these may be added discussions of the deeper issues of skepticism and faith, arguments as to the existence of God and the soul, Mr. Browning's opinion of Italian art, Mr. Browning's opinion of German music, Mr. Browning's opinion of mediæval architecture, the Greek Comic Drama, moral responsibility, justifiable homicide, and what not—all in verse, and in a masquerade of characters, all speaking the one, the odd, the unmistakable language of their puppet-master; or, as Mr. Stedman has so admirably put it: "his spirit infused, as if by metempsychosis, within them all, forces each to assume a strange Pentecostal tone, which we discover to be that of the poet himself. Bass, treble, or recitative—whether in pleading, invective, or banter—the voice is still there."

The brief epitomes of contents given above, save for a comment or two, are not mine. They are quoted in the words of Mrs. Sunderland Orr, who, as all know, with Mr. Browning's consent and approval, has published a Handbook or guide through the intricacies of the author's works, that zealous ignorance may not lose itself too utterly in the labyrinthine aberrations of psycho-poetics. Consider these subjects one moment with their convolutions and their involutions of subtlety, their ragged, inartistic style, their eccentric and grotesque treatment—and ask yourself, even if your definition of poetry include all the sciences, if this is poetry, the same divine art as that of Spenser, Milton and Shelley? A book of rugged, prose essays on such subjects as these, from the hands of such a thinker as Mr. Browning, would have been a far more valuable contribution to the literature of his country than these interminable parleyings in verse. Give such subjects to any of the score or two of English poets that rank between Shakespeare and Mr. Browning, and he *can* not make poetry out of them; give such subjects to Shakespeare himself, and he *will* not make poetry out of them. Nay, the master, a wiser than Mr. Browning, leaves psycho-poetics to the nineteenth century, and troubles us not at all with Falstaff and Doll Tearsheet bandying rhymes, but rises and descends with his subjects, choosing his medium of expression with the unerring tact of a true artist. Think what a problem Mr. Browning set himself, and then wonder, if you can, at his failure. A subject taken in all its difficulty, a medium of expression the most unfitted to that subject, we cannot be surprised that we have contortion, rough, unpoetical, if often telling strokes. No instrument can produce

music under such circumstances ; it must produce something, and discord is the result.

None the least remarkable thing about Mr. Browning, however, is the fact that he is far from devoid of that power of selection, the want of which accounts for so much of the Wordsworthian low countries. The brain that has produced these abuses of genius, has also given us many a gem in setting of pure gold. Who does not know *Pippa Passes*, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *In a Balcony*, *Evelyn Hope*? the last deserving of a place beside Wordsworth's *Lucy*, Landor's *Rose Aylmer* and Lamb's *Hester*. Mr. Browning wilfully chose his course, and like Wagner, as wilfully remained in it. Stopping but a step short of Wagner's denial of his first born, Mr. Browning wished mainly to be known by that in which he was grotesque and original, and not by that wherein he has carried forward the stately flow of English poetry. Time emphasized Mr. Browning's character in all its elemental roughness ; and irreverence for the fundamental canons of his art, crude realism and wanton, stuttering verbiage have ruined one of the greatest minds, in its natural endowments, that our century has produced. Mr. Browning belongs to the class of literary innovators, a class that has not infrequently included men of the highest artistic genius. The world has a constant need for the reformer, whether he seek to lead us along the lines of radical advance, or head an unusual conservative opposition. In motion alone is life, and there is no man who so deserves our veneration—I had almost said worship—as he, who, true to the verity that speaks within, seeks to enlarge man's intellectual horizon by a tilt against the conventions of his age. These are the true knights-errant ; and though some of them do tilt against windmills, many are the venomous dragons of artistic prejudice overthrown by their valor.

Mr. Browning, like Wagner, has attempted a huge experiment in art, and by his transcendent personal force has succeeded in winning contemporary public approbation. His powerful personality is no more, and with the fallen champion, the cause is lost. But in his failure consists the vindication of true art. As a philosopher, as a "thinker," Mr. Browning has done much, and that with a weapon which we had thought hung up to rust since the days of Alexander Pope. What such a man as Mr. Browning might have accomplished with the unerring needle-gun of a Matthew Arnold, it is bootless to inquire. But that the bulk of Mr. Browning's writings, whatever else they may be, when judged by any reasonable standard, are not poetry—this I can not but feel myself entirely justified in maintaining. A century hence, Mr. Browning will be known to the literature of his country for the genuine blossoms of

poetic thought that have from time to time sprung unsought and untilled from the rocky soil of his brain, whilst his psychological monstrosities will sink into that oblivion which is kindred to much of the cabalistic utterance in which their hideousness is expressed.

If Robert Browning has succeeded as a poet by successive failures, he will ultimately fail through the very height of his success. We English-speaking nations are not so unpoetical a race that we can rest content with such hybrid forms of art. A reaction must and will set in—a reaction that will establish the independence and purity of art. The poetry of the future will not consist of psycho-poetics.

II.

ROBERT BROWNING AND THE ARABESQUE IN ART.

It is, perhaps, but just that I offer you some explanation of a title so unusual as that which forms the heading of this lecture, especially of the word Arabesque, and of my linking of it with the name of Mr. Browning. The Arabesque, it will be remembered, was an elaborate style of ornamentation used among the earlier Saracens or Arabs, in which the most indulgent play of the fancy was permitted, except that a literal interpretation of the second commandment forbade the representation of a living creature therein. By a figure of speech which, it is to be hoped, may not be regarded as too hyperbolic, I wish to apply this term to the verse of Robert Browning, who, whether for a fashionable *cult* of the moment or for an eternity of fame, has certainly written much which is not in "the likeness of any form that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."

The dangers that attend any contemporary estimate of an author's work need call for only a passing mention here; the passions and prejudices, the personal equation of both author and critic, the fashion of the movement—all may affect our verdict on such a question. Contemporary fame is the creature of circumstance; it is posterity alone that can weigh, consider, and estimate the result, not because of superior wisdom, but because of greater dispassionateness, and that broader view which the eminence of time alone can afford. John Lyly, whose enthusiastic contemporaries declared that he had "done for English what Tully had done for the Latin tongue," is now chiefly remembered—whether justly or not—as the author of a species of literary foppery as superfluous to genuine style as the Elizabethan ruff must have been to personal comfort; and Waller, "the greatest lyric poet that England has produced," is scarcely now esteemed to a degree at all warranted by so grandiloquent a title. Many an author has ridden forward to a regal popularity on the crest of the wave of the *Zeitgeist*; and many another has been carried beneath in the undertow of prejudice, to remain forgotten until a wiser and less passionate age has discovered the

worth that was in him. On the other hand, it would be far from fair not to acknowledge that a contemporary estimate is not to be despised, as contemporary praise generally indicates at least that quality of mind that can command attention. There are men with whom we may be at odds on all essential questions, but who none the less challenge a respectful hearing; men whose theories we deny, but whose abilities and achievements we cannot but admire. Mr. Browning is a man of commanding literary presence, a man of the strongest personality; and it is more than likely that not only his success, but many of his limitations are due to this supereminent quality. Our purpose is simply to inquire into the nature of Mr. Browning's style as a poet, and to see if it be possible to find therein some reasonable explanation, not only of his unexampled notability, but likewise of the extreme distaste and dislike with which he imbues many whose right to an opinion is at least equal to that of their brother critics who are in the fashion.

In one of the most admirable of his wholly admirable essays, the late Mr. Bagehot enumerates three principal modes of art: "the *pure*, which is sometimes, but not wisely, called the classical; the *ornate*, which is also universally called romantic; the *grotesque*, which might be called the mediæval." Pure literature "describes the type in its simplicity; it is that art which works with the fewest strokes, in which a complete effect is produced by detail so rare and so harmonized as to escape us." Every stroke must make for the main design. The accessories are sometimes said to be invisible, because the appendages are so choice that the shape only is perceived. "Wordsworth at his best, and Milton with exceptions and conditions," are the best exponents of this mode in English literature; while, if we would know pure art in perfection, we must seek it in Homer and Sophocles. Hartley Coleridge's beautiful lyric, *She is not Fair to Outward View*, or Wordsworth's famous sonnet on *Westminster Bridge*, neither of which need be quoted here, may be taken as admirable specimens of the pure in art. It is, perhaps, needful to remark that the besetting sins of the pure style are conventionality and baldness, from neither of which vices is its great English exponent, Wordsworth, wholly free.

Ornate art, while it too "aims at giving a delineation of the typical idea in its perfection and its fullness, * * * wishes to surround the type with the greatest number of circumstances which it will bear. * * * It works not by choice and selection, but by accumulation and aggregation. Nothing is described as it is; everything has about it an atmosphere of something else." As an instance, take the following extract from Lord Tennyson's *Enoch Arden*:

“ While Enoch was abroad on wrathful seas,
 Or often journeying landward; for in truth
 Enoch’s white horse, and Enoch’s ocean spoil
 In ocean-smelling osier, and his face,
 Rough-reddened with a thousand winter gales,
 Not only to the market cross is known,
 But in the leafy lanes behind the down,
 Far as the portal-warding lion-whelp,
 And peacock yew-tree of the lonely Hall,
 Whose Friday fare was Enoch’s ministering.

Here fish become “ocean spoil” or “Friday fare;” an ill-smelling basket, an “ocean-smelling osier;” “rough-reddened with a thousand winter gales” expresses tanned, and “ministering” is certainly a fine word for selling. “Portal-warding lion-whelp” and the “peacock yew-tree” are assuredly picturesque details, but entirely extraneous to the main idea, which, robbed of all fine phrases, is simply, when Enoch was not at sea catching fish, he peddled them ashore. This illustration is an extreme one. When not overdone, as, for instance, in Keats’s exquisite *Eve of Saint Agnes*, ornate art is perfectly legitimate. Shakespeare himself is its greatest exponent, as he is at other times the greatest exponent of the pure. And, indeed, it may be said that the extreme of the ornate was the besetting sin of the Elizabethan age, as it is largely of our own. The vices of the ornate include indefiniteness and obscurity, almost all rhetorical exaggerations and plethora of treatment, and that striving after effect that, ignoring the rules of any art, leads to grotesqueness. Finally, ornate art runs the risk of giving undue importance to mere manual dexterity.

As a result, pure art is most concerned with the subject, ornate art with its treatment. In the first the artist is lost, in the second the consciousness of effort becomes apparent. It is perhaps a matter of small moment as to who wrote Homer. The chaste and perfect flower of pure art is before us, whether its petals opened under the quickening rays of a single sun or under a conjunction of propitious planetary influences. But when it comes to the consideration of a minutely delineated pile of tunnies in a fishmonger’s shop, a dead pheasant or hare, nay, a bottle or discarded cigar-stump, the question at once arises, who has painted this thing so cleverly?

Grotesque art “takes the type, so to say, in all its *difficulties*. It gives a representation of it in its minimum development, amid the circumstances least favorable to it, just where it is encumbered with incongruities. * * It deals, to use the language of science, not with normal types, but with abnormal specimens; to use the language of old philos-

ophy, not with what nature is striving to be, but with what by some lapse she has happened to become." Grotesque art should, therefore, rather be regarded as a vice of the ornate than a legitimate form of art. Although the Arabesque originated in the principle that all natural images be excluded, in the hands of a later school (to quote the substance of the remarks of an eminent authority), this principle was soon lost sight of, and birds, animals, human figures and chimeras, or, indeed, any objects that might take the fancy of the artist, were lavishly employed, and the work became "extravagant in composition, ludicrous, and sometimes æsthetically offensive." An ornamentation that arises, not naturally, out of the subject, but is loaded upon it extraneously, an ornamentation pushed to the extreme until the subject is lost in the treatment, to the unnatural, to distortion, to the grotesque—this is what is meant by the term Arabesque. Mr. Browning proceeds not, as the Moorish artist did, upon a set avoidance of reality; but, with the later school, so weighs down reality with abstraction, distortion, and subtilty that even his "ugly realism" can not bring him back to nature. The choice, for instance, of Caliban, not for contrast among other dramatic figures, but as the portrait-subject of a poem, is grotesque. Mr. Browning's psychological treatment of that subject combines grotesque realism with the Arabesque creation of a scene and of circumstances utterly unnatural and unreal.

Out of the works of Mr. Browning no better historical example of the Arabesque treatment of a theme is to be found than the excesses of that school of poets which Dr. Johnson, not so very unwisely, called "the Metaphysical School." Take Dr. Donne's "abstruse and profound" reflection upon man as a microcosm:—

"If men be worlds, then is in every one
Something to answer in some proportion
All the world's riches; and in good men, this
Virtue, our form's form, and our soul's soul, is:"

in which we have the "metaphysical;" or the famous figure of the compasses from the same poet's *Valediction Forbidding Mourning*, in which, speaking of the souls of two lovers, he says:

"If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth if th' other do,
And though it in the centre sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
 Like th' other foot, obliquely run.
 Thy firmness makes my circles just, •
 And makes me end where I begun."

If you please, these quotations from Donne are only quaint and "learned" conceits; add to the mixture large draughts of ugly modern realism, and the grotesque or Arabesque in art is complete.

It is curious to note the ebb and flow of these various principles in our literature; how the flood of ornate art, setting in with the Italian *Renaissance*, reached its full by the end of Elizabeth's reign, to overflow in the Fletchers and Herberts, the Donnes and Crashaws of the succeeding reigns; how the ebb setting in with Waller—if Mr. Gosse will have it so—left bare the sterile sands, or stood in brackish shallows from Addison to Akenside. How Wordsworth distinguished between the false and the true classicism or purity of style, although not entirely free from the faults he so much reprobated in others; and how the advancing tide of the ornate, under the influence of Tennyson, has, in our own day, swept all before it, whilst Mr. Browning has made it a veritable spring-tide for us, and drowned out many a struggling flower of classicism.

But does Mr. Browning really treat his subjects in this Arabesque and unnatural way? Is Mr. Browning really grotesque? There are people to whom he is at all times perfectly perspicuous, just as there are people—and they must be the same—to whom Shakespeare is always at his best, and to whom the Apocalypse is so simple as scarcely to admit of any difference of explanation. To such and to others, who, like Chinese devotees, from long gazing upon the *bizarre* and contorted figure of some favorite Joss, have come to regard it as the visible embodiment of all god-like perfection, it may be necessary to explain. In turning over the leaves of Mr. Browning's books our attention is arrested by such titles as these, *Artemis Prologuizes*, *Prince Hohensteil-Schwangau*, *Red Cotton Night Cap Country*, with his rambling dedication about night caps, fiddles, and other things equally poetical. Or to descend from the general to the particular, take this concrete example, from *Holy Cross Day*, "on which the Jews were forced to attend an annual Christian sermon in Rome;" these are the remarks:

"Fee, faw, fum! Bubble and squeak!
 Blessedest Thursday's the fat of the week.
 Rumble and tumble, sleek and rough,
 Stinking and savory, snug and gruff,
 Take the church-road, for the bell's due chime
 Give us the summons—'tis sermon time.

"Boh, here's Barnabas! Job, that's you?
Up stumps Solomon—bustling too?
Shame, man! greedy beyond your years
To handsel the bishop's shaving shears?
Fair play's a jewel! leave friends in the lurch?
Stand on a line ere you start for church.

"Higgledy piggledy, packed we lie,
Rats in a hamper, swine in a sty,
Wasps in a bottle, frogs in a sieve,
Worms in a carcase, fleas in a sleeve.
Hist! square shoulders, settle your thumbs
And buzz for the bishop—here he comes."

As another instance, we have Shakespeare represented as talking thus:

"I?—who never once have wished
Death before the day appointed:
Lived and liked, not poohed and pished!

"Ah, but so I shall not enter
Scroll in hand, the common heart—
Stopped at surface: since at centre
Song should reach *Wellschmerz*, world-smart!"

Even Shakespeare's German critics, who claim most things about him, to the very shape of his head, have never made him speak German. It was reserved for the master of the Arabesque to set aside Shakespeare's "little Latin and less Greek," and present to us the incongruity of a subject of Queen Elizabeth quoting from a foreign language with which he was unacquainted to express a nineteenth century idea, and obligingly translating it that the simplest Browning novice might know what was meant thereby. Finally, is the following poetical or grotesque?

"What gimcracks, genuine Japanese:
Gape-jaw and goggle-ey, the frog,
Dragons, owls, monkeys, beetles, geese;
Some crush-nosed human-hearted dog:
Queer names, too, such a catalogue."

One is well tempted to echo the last line.

If we except Jonathan Swift, never has a great writer exhibited such a taste for "ugly reality" as has Mr. Browning. Mr. Browning is much of a realist, in the bad sense of that word; although he has escaped, by reason of the age and the country in which he lived, the more degrading tendencies of a certain foreign pseudo-literature. In the words of a

recent critic, "possibly hardly one of his most considerable efforts can be found which is not great, because of its odd mixture. He puts together what no one else would have put together, and produces on our minds a result which no one else would have produced or tried to produce." The artist, whether he work in the pure or in the ornate, selects from among his materials, and is not squeamish, if he can heighten an effect by legitimate shadow. The master of the grotesque selects too; but he selects the ugly, the gnarled and the knotted, delighting to limit his art by difficult conditions and to smother his inspiration in fruitless psychological problems. Grant that Mr. Browning has, indeed, demonstrated that, in some exceedingly rare cases, the grotesque may be used as a legitimate form of art, that *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* is a real triumph of the grotesque, and that Mr. Browning's works are not devoid of other felicitous examples; yet, none the less, a moment's consideration of the nature of Arabesque treatment and the grotesque in art is quite sufficient to convince any candid observer of its essential unfitness as a method of all work. The admiration excited by a *tour de force*, whether in verse or elsewhere, is not of the same character as that excited by arousing and stimulating the sense of the beautiful. The moment that the artist's dexterity becomes a matter of consideration, the moment we begin to think of his originality, his logic or his philosophy, the moment, in short, that the appeal is made to the purely intellectual powers of analysis and synthesis, and the only emotion excited is that of wonder at the author's temerity or cleverness—that moment art as art is degraded, and soon ceases to be.

When the time shall come, and come it will, a poet, worthy that august title, will arise, to show us that novelty, beauty, originality, may all combine with simplicity to produce the highest art. But the time is not yet, and, for the present, literary contortionists and poetical jugglers please us the more. It is not every one that can juggle three apples or four open knife-blades in one hand; yet any man can walk. True, but is it every man that can walk with the step of a god? However, let us not despair: there is need of even the juggler; and when a man of real force undertakes the trade—much as we may regret the degradation—there is much to be learned. What Mr. Browning has not succeeded in doing in the realms of the Arabesque is presumably beyond the power of man. Where he has failed, no smaller man dare ever hope for success: and some things have thus been demonstrated impossible.

For Mr. Browning's lofty ethics and fervor of heart, I have nothing but praise; for his poetry—upon the rare occasions when he has written poetry—nothing but admiration. The essential falsity of his fundamen-

tal doctrines of art has unhappily perverted one of the first minds of our century.

The answer to our inquiry then is this: the extreme distaste and dislike with which the works of Mr. Browning inspire the minority—if it is actually the minority—is due to a false method of art, employed, for the most part, on subjects in their nature essentially inartistic. There may be much reason for excusing the wretchedness of a sermon for its orthodoxy and evident piety. But sound philosophy cannot save inartistic verse from being bad poetry. That sort of thing cannot apply to art, wherein a bad workman, be he such from ignorance or willful intent, must forever forfeit the wages of immortality. Mr. Browning has not claimed to be simply a teacher; by the choice of his medium of expression, he lays claim to the title artist, while wantonly disobeying the rules of his art.

On the other hand, the causes of Mr. Browning's popularity are neither few nor far to seek. The character of our age makes for Browning, as it did for Carlyle and Emerson. As a transcendentalist, Mr. Browning is a leader of the intellectual revolt against the materialism of our daily life. He does not, like Shelley, transport us into the empyrean to breathe with him the pure æther of angels; but recognizing that some difficulties attend upon earthly lungs in such lofty altitudes, has pursued precisely the opposite method, and has been justly designated as "an idealist working by contraries." In this he falls in thoroughly with the character of an age that delights in the abstract in form of the concrete. An age that can admire "poems" made up of soul-probing analysis, dismally deep psychology, and verses bristling with syllogisms, naturally admires Mr. Browning, and delights to inform us that he is the most learned of poets. Alas, perchance therefore the less inspired.

But there are other reasons besides Mr. Browning's touch with the spirit of the time, which space can permit me to little more than name. We are all tired of nature: we know so much more about her protoplasmic involutions and evolutions than did our ancestors; we want new combinations, odd conceptions, curious and bold conjunctions of thought. Never has the perennial passion for the odd and unusual been satiated as Mr. Browning has satiated it. Again, the prevailing unacquaintance with our greater classics at first hand, that results from the necessity which the average reader feels of keeping up with the times, has materially abetted this morbid craving for novelty, and left many of Mr. Browning's readers devoid of any real artistic standard by which to judge their favorite's merits. Perhaps not a few of us, too, are like the

Ettrick Shepherd, who confessed : "I like to use a word I dinna ken the meaning o'." Finally let it be whispered, and not bruited much about, some of this great poet's devotees do not read their Browning : a matter more commendable to their taste than to their sincerity.

Saving admiration for a vigorous and somewhat earthy form of transcendentalism, there is not one of these motives which can be construed into a sufficient excuse for this *cult*. What can we hope of an art that struts thus in borrowed plumes, mistrustful of her own divine nature? What can we hope of an artistic *cult* that sets up such hybrid forms for worship? When I think of the irreverence that would dethrone the immortals and place the master of the Arabesque on a pedestal, the peer of Shakespeare, I can not but fear lest some incensed prophet shall come down from Sinai to shiver, in his wrath, the tables of all true poetic law.

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